

SOMALI CULTURE



- Somalia is located on the eastern coast of Africa and borders Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya
- Limited Somali immigration to the US dates as far back as the 1920s, but most Somalis arrived as refugees as a result of the country's civil war in the early 1990s.
- The majority of Somalian refugees are Sunni Muslim, though some may have converted to Christianity during their time in refugee camps
- Ethnic Somalis make up the largest ethnic group in Somalia
- Somali Bantus are an ethnic minority group within Somalia who have historically had little power in mainstream Somali society
- Bantu is a general term that incorporates over 400 ethnic groups in Africa, each with its own language/dialect
- Somali is the official language of the country, with two distinct regional variants: Af Maay (also known as Maay Maay) and Af Maxaa (pronounced mahaa)
- Other languages commonly spoken by Somali refugees include Zigua (tribal language from Tanzania), Swahili and Arabic
- Most refugees came from refugee camps in Kenya

Traditional Somali Perspectives

- Family is seen as the principal source of personal security and identity, with the structure being primarily patriarchal
- Fathers tend to be the disciplinarians, while mothers handle the household duties and childrearing

- Large families are often viewed as desirable, and the nuclear family may also include grandparents, uncles and aunts
- Loyalty to family and clan is important, as is respect for elders and religious authorities
- Family life often revolves around religious/Islamic practices
- Independence, individualism and democracy are valued
- Social status and saving face are important
- Appreciation may not be expressed verbally
- Islamic tradition dictates many of the social norms

Somali Language

Both Af Maay and Af Maxaa were the official languages until the government declared Af Maxaa the officially written language of Somalia in 1972. A Somali script based on the Roman alphabet was adopted at that time (there was no written language prior). Af Maay and Af Maxaa are similar in written form, but are very different in spoken forms.

Somali consists of all but four letters of the English alphabet (c, p, v and z). Of the 33 sounds, 15 are pronounced similar to their English counterparts (b, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, n, s, sh, t, w and y). Q, r and x may present difficulties for Somalis because these are pronounced differently in Somali.

Vowels (a, e, i, o, u) always have one sound, and each sound has one letter. Therefore, English vowels may be more difficult to learn because English does not offer this one-to-one correspondence.

Some letters in Somali are doubled to indicate a stress in pronunciation, so there may be a tendency by some to emphasize the double consonants in English words (more so than a native speaker would) such as in 'bigger,' 'summer,' and 'middle.'

Indefinite articles such as a/an do not exist in Somali, so this may be an area that is difficult for some to master. Because Somali only has four, English prepositions can also pose challenges in language learning for Somalis. Common word order is object-subject-verb, so this may be reflected in their early spoken and written English.

Education/Literacy

Formal education often is limited to primary and intermediate levels, with secondary education rare. Minority groups such as the Somali Bantus had even more limited access to education in Somalia. Literacy rates vary among Somalis, though school-aged children in many of the Kenyan refugee camps are offered some primary and secondary education. Some children and adults are able to read and write with the help of Kenyan Somalis who work as translators and teachers in the camps. Those in the camps may have also learned English informally as well.

Names

Somali names have three distinct parts. The first name is specific to the individual, while the second name reflects the father's name. The third part is the name of the child's paternal grandfather. This can help explain why siblings may have the same middle names.

Tips for Successful Meetings/Communication

Greetings

Differing from other Muslim groups, Somalis warmly greet each other with handshakes. However, because of their religious beliefs, shaking hands and direct eye contact with the opposite sex is commonly avoided.

Gestures

The right hand is viewed as the polite and clean hand to use for tasks such as eating, writing and greeting others. Some parents will actively try to train children to use their right hand, if they appear to show a left-handed preference when young.

Somali use sweeping hand and arm gestures to dramatize speech. Many ideas are expressed through specific hand gestures such as:

- A swift twist of the open hand means “nothing” or “no”.
- It is impolite to point the sole of one's foot or shoe at another person.
- It is impolite to use the index finger to call somebody; that gesture is used for calling dogs.
- Some may consider the American “thumbs up” obscene.

Relations between Ethnic Somalis and Bantu Refugees

As with other ethnic groups with a history of strained relations, do not assume that there is immediate mutual trust and respect between ethnic Somalis and Somali Bantus. Be aware of complexities involved in working with interpreters.

Web Site Resources (current as of 1/2009)

- Confederation of Somali Community Minnesota
<http://www.cscmn.org>
- Cultural Orientation Resource Center (Center for Applied Linguistics)
<http://www.cal.org/co/publications/profiles.html>
- EthnoMed.org
<http://ethnomed.org/ethnomed/cultures/somali/somali.html>

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